

## Former Shelby County commissioner Vasco Smith dies

By Jody Callahan

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Vasco Smith could have been described any number of ways: dentist, Air Force veteran, jazz lover, politician.

Those who knew him best kept coming back to the same words: freedom fighter.

"Vasco was a great soldier in the fight for freedom," said former NAACP leader Dr. Benjamin Hooks of Memphis.

"He was a tremendous warrior, even up unto his last days."

Dr. Smith, a longtime civil rights advocate and former Shelby County commissioner, died Monday. He was 89.

Dr. Smith and his wife, Maxine, executive secretary of the Memphis branch of the NAACP, celebrated their 56th wedding anniversary 10 days ago.

Their partnership had a lasting effect on the march toward civil rights in Memphis. "She and Vasco should have been called the freedom fighters," said Rep. Steve Cohen (D-Tenn.), who served with Dr. Smith on the commission. "They would stand up for principle and stand up on issues. They were strong moral voices in the community."

Dr. Smith graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1937, then from LeMoyne College in 1941. He received his dental degree from Meharry Medical College in Nashville in 1945.

He began his public life in 1973 when he won a special election for an at-large seat on the Shelby County Quorum Court, forerunner of the commission. He served on that body until retiring from politics in 1994.

During his time there, Dr. Smith and others were instrumental in founding the Regional Medical Center at Memphis. Dr. Smith remembered his mother, who worked at the old John Gaston Hospital, telling him stories about that facility's inadequacies.

"I always said if I could at some time do something about it, I would. On the County Commission, I saw an opportunity," he told The Commercial Appeal in 1994.

But it was also his efforts at promoting civil rights and rooting out racism that left a lasting mark on the city.

Teaming with the likes of Jesse Turner, A. W. Willis, H. T. Lockard, Russell Sugarmon,

Hooks and others, the Smiths pushed for voter registration, filed lawsuits, raised money and helped elect African-Americans to office. They also took part in demonstrations and were each arrested more than once.

"I know that I would not be where I am today as a lawyer or in political circles had it not been for Vasco Smith," said Shelby County Mayor A C Wharton, a neighbor of the Smiths, who announced Dr. Smith's death at Monday's commission meeting.

"I could best describe him as a valiant soldier in the army for justice (and) equality who suffered many combat injuries and never received a Purple Heart for it," he said.

Dr. Smith was also a legendary music aficionado with a particular love for jazz. At the Smith home, a large portion of one wall is devoted to his expansive collection, dominated by jazz but including music that covered most of the nearly nine decades of his life. The albums were catalogued in the kind of minute detail characteristic of someone passionate about music.

Wharton would often pass along obituaries from The New York Times when an influential musician would pass away, but Dr. Smith's knowledge of the musician would run deeper than the newspaper's account.

"You name it, he would give you a dissertation on it," Wharton said.

In an interview with The Commercial Appeal in January, Maxine Smith talked about how she and Dr. Smith's efforts built on even greater sacrifices made by those who came before.

"We hit the ground running after Vasco got out of the service," she said. "I never had the good sense to get away and I don't have a single regret.

"We all got here on somebody's shoulders and we can go as far back in history as we want and far enough we don't even remember some of those days. One good thing stacks on top of another. I sometimes wonder why God is so good to Vasco and I."

Visitation will be Thursday at two locations: from noon to 3 p.m. at R.S. Lewis & Sons Funeral Home, then from 4 to 7 p.m. at LeMoyne-Owen College's Alma Hanson Student Center. The funeral will be at noon Friday at Metropolitan Baptist Church at 767 Walker, with burial in Elmwood. In lieu of flowers, the family asks that memorials be sent to LeMoyne-Owen, the Memphis Branch NAACP or Freedom's Chapel Christian Church.

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